

When Europe is fashionable: The strange paradox of the Italian elections



The upcoming Italian election will be closely watched in other EU states. [Giulia Pastorella](#) writes that while on the face of it most parties running in the election are markedly pro-European, there is an undercurrent of Euroscepticism in the campaign which should prompt concern for those in favour of further European integration.

The European Council of Foreign Relations [ranked Italy 23rd out of 28](#) when it comes to individual support for the EU, down from 10th a decade ago. And a recent [Pew survey](#) highlighted that 34% of Italians would like to get out of the EU, a percentage second only to Greece. It is therefore very surprising that, with a couple of exceptions, most parties running in the 2018 Italian elections are markedly pro-European.

However, despite paying lip service to pro-European rhetoric, most parties are in fact trying to appeal to Eurosceptic voters, promising overhauls of the EU that are effectively equivalent to backtracking on the path of European integration. The surprising ease with which parties keep swinging back and forth between pro and anti-Europe positions is testimony to the difficulty they have in understanding what is most alluring for their voters. This represents a risk for Europe as a whole.

We love EU – or maybe not

It is often the case that parties change their stance on certain issues as elections approach. The issue of European integration is no exception this time round, but to an extent that is almost schizophrenic.

The short timeframe of the electoral campaign might explain the hectic atmosphere when it comes to parties' stances on the EU. The centre-left PD (Democratic Party), led by former prime minister Matteo Renzi, has notably changed its discourse. While Renzi often lamented the EU as a den of technocrats and repeatedly fought it in the name of Italian sovereignty while he was PM, the PD recently announced that it supports a United States of Europe. However, the party wants to renegotiate the fiscal compact, thus indicating at best a somewhat tentative support for the current European economic direction.

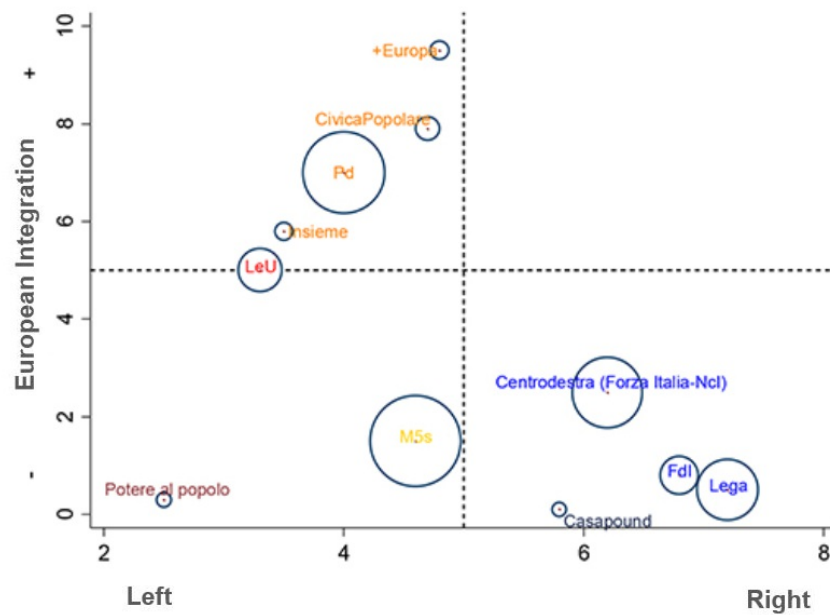
Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right party, Forza Italia, has put forward a programme that includes renegotiating EU treaties and paying less into the EU budget. However, Berlusconi himself has [declared](#) that Italy should only 'threaten to leave the EU, but never actually do it' and 'aim at achieving the Europe that De Gasperi wanted'. Nonetheless, his party finds it acceptable to be in the same coalition with the extreme right-wing Northern League, which is fully Eurosceptic and wants to leave the eurozone on the basis that the euro is a "German currency" which has damaged Italy's economy.

The leftist/populist Five Star Movement has adopted an even more confusing stance. Born as an anti-Europe, anti-euro movement under its previous leader, the comedian Beppe Grillo, it was almost admitted into the liberal ALDE (Alliance of the Liberal Democrats of Europe) European Parliamentary Group, which includes mainly fiercely Europhile parties. It is unclear whether its new 31 year old leader Luigi Di Maio would still push for an *Italexit* referendum if he were to govern, or indeed what the Five Star Movement would vote for if they did call such a referendum.

+Europa (More Europe), as the name suggests, has built, somehow bravely, its whole electoral campaign on the clear need for Italy to be pushing towards a United States of Europe, with an elected president of the commission and transnational lists in the European Parliament. It proposes a way forward playing by the current rules until time is ripe for full federalism.

Interestingly, if we look at the Europe constituency, which is where I am a candidate, all parties are pretty much acknowledging that the EU is a necessary precondition in their personal and professional lives, and they often brush away as minor details the positions of their headquarters back in Rome.

Figure: Italian party programmes for the 2018 election on left/right and pro/anti-European integration dimensions



Source: [La Repubblica](#), quoting a study by Istituto Cattaneo which uses the Comparative Manifesto database

Is Europe important enough to justify such U-turns in policy? A recent analysis using the Comparative Manifesto database shows that Europe is in fact the issue that is given the least attention in the party programmes of all major issues (10.4% compared to 24.8% for Welfare). Europe's importance is clearly marginal, and this, mixed with the confusion described above, does not suggest a reassuring political landscape for Italy's European partners.

Germany and France's leaders have been [pushing relentlessly](#) for more Europe with a mix of symbolic gestures and concrete announcements. The message is that Europe is, if not back, at least ready to fight for its future. The Franco-German engine is steaming ahead, and Merkel and Macron must be no doubt watching the rather short and hectic Italian electoral campaign with interest. But all of the potential results appear grim: would they rather get a half-hearted ally for their planned renaissance with the centre-left coalition in power, a half-hearted enemy if the centre-right wins, or another Brexit scenario with the Five Star Movement at the helm?

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